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ABSTRACT

THIS DESCRIPTION OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CLASSICAL GREEK PROGRAM AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL FOR A MAJORITY OF STUDENTS IN A PRIVATE NEW ENGLAND SCHOOL CITES MOTIVATIONAL TECHNIQUES IN THE HOPE THAT THEY MIGHT BE SUCCESSFULLY EMPLOYED IN OTHER SCHOOL SYSTEMS. A DISCUSSION OF GREEK IN THE CURRICULUM AND ITS ACCEPTANCE UNDERSCORES THE DESIRE OF STUDENTS TO STUDY SUBJECTS OF A CHALLENGING AND RELEVANT NATURE. (RL)

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PREPARATORY SCHOOL GREEK

The following words are reprinted with permission from The annual report of the Rector—1963–1964 *of St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire. They were brought to our attention by J. Appleton Thayer, retired classics master at St. Paul's. The description of how a Greek program was developed may be useful to others for achieving similar results.*

SPEAKING TO A GROUP of alumni, parents and other friends at a St. Paul's School dinner in Philadelphia last winter, I remarked upon the presence at the school of twenty boys coming from Bangkok, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Paris, Casablanca and other places. Later, while responding to questions from the floor about the curriculum, I mentioned that we had seventy Greek students. One of my close friends confessed later to saying to her husband: "How does St. Paul's get all those boys from Greece? It seems disproportionate and almost zany for a school of four hundred and fifty boys." Her husband, a patient man, explained that the boys were not from Greece, but were boys who were studying the ancient language of the Greeks. Greek students indeed.

To many in modern America seventy students of ancient Greek in a relatively small student body seems as disproportionate and zany as would seventy natives of the Greek islands being enrolled in the school. Yet for a number of years there have been between fifty and seventy boys studying Greek at St. Paul's School, and that fact deserves to be told about in a time when little attention is given to so old a language and so formidable a literature.

Western civilization is rooted in the Old Testament and the New Testament. This is a matter of fact. Our thought forms, our values, our laws, our ideas all come from the background and the rich literary soil of the ancient languages. When Latin is added to our cultural compost, with its Roman law and Roman ecclesiastical tradition, it is not hard to see where our roots have found their nourishment. Of course there are concomitant learnings gathered almost unwittingly by scholars, travelers, and tradesmen in their moving about the world. It would be ridiculous to overlook eastern and oriental influences which have added a small part of their wealth to western civilization. The compelling fact is, however, that Hebrew and Greek are our richest literature and provide enlightenment and idealism to hungry intellects in our time.

In American schools of the past the curriculum included Latin, Greek, mathematics and divinity or religion. At St. Paul's School, and perhaps at similar boarding schools, these four subjects were once required of all students, and, wonder of wonders, were taught by all teachers. Through a hundred years of history these subjects suffered attrition and fracture. With the coming of modern languages, science, and history, and with specialization and major courses, teachers were no longer equipped to teach all subjects, and students were required to take fewer of the classical studies previously required.

Eight or ten years ago we at St. Paul's School were faced with a handful of Greek students, no more than twelve to fifteen, which made Greek a very expensive offering and, with such small numbers interested, a somewhat discouraging problem. With so few students it appeared to be a matter of time, and a short time at that, until Greek would be sacrificed to the modern gods of utility, popularity, and mild academic demand. Yet talking with Greek students yielded a surprising enthusiasm for and pleasure in the study of classical Greek. The boys liked the subject, were grateful for the privilege of studying it, and were surprised that so few students were involved. Our too few Greek students had found the poetry moving and beautiful and emotionally satisfying. The myths had a new flavor in the original. The dissertations, the drama, the lively biographical detail, the philosophical flights were all found to be enjoyable, often enthralling, and gave a new dimension to life.

To be sure, the first year of Greek was tedious and demanded concentrated hard work. But from the start the students had found a viable quality in the hieroglyphics, the strange alphabet, and the curious beauty of the shape and form of the language. Furthermore, after the first year they discovered a world of literary pleasure available to

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their growing intellectual life. For them it was not unlike a visit to another planet, a new country, a hitherto unheard of but delightful old scene. Their imaginations were enlarged and their enjoyment of other languages was enhanced.

With so much enthusiasm among our few Greek students, couldn't we find a way to light old fires anew for still others? We devised a simple but effective way to present the subject of Greek to other students. In early March, after the boys had been in the school five or six months, and we could see how able they were in learning a new language (usually first-year Latin) we called together about sixty of the hundred and ten "new boys" for a meeting in the Rectory library. Most of the boys were in the Second Form.

As Rector, I called attention to the fact of the boys' language aptitude, and their proven ability in learning a new language. Furthermore, I presented a brief story of the value of ancient language and literature in understanding and appreciating modern language and literature. "Where did we come from?" is as fundamental a question for modern man as "Where are we going?" Referring to "hours spent on much that is forgotten," William Johnson Cory of Eton commented in 1861, "The shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions." His remark is also applicable to forgotten origins of western culture.

The head of the department of classical languages then described the possibility for the boys in studying Greek and all that the language implies for us in modern America. The head of the modern language department pointed out the value of Latin and Greek in acquiring a knowledge of modern languages. Then a Sixth Former described his pleasure and profit in several years of the study of Greek.

For years this simple presentation has enlivened and invited the interest of young boys in daring to undertake a course in Greek. The testimony of the Sixth Formers has been of great interest. Through the years these oldest boys in the school have said:

"If the school thinks you should take Greek, you'd better do it. As I understand it, the school tries to offer us subjects that will use our best gifts."

"Take the Greek if you really want an interesting subject that gets more and more interesting as you go along with it."

"I've found that the study of Greek has affected everything I do. Even my way of writing has changed. It has given me better form in sentence and paragraph structure. Of course the Greeks were great on form anyway. You see it in their architecture, but it is also important in their writing."

"One thing I have enjoyed most in Greek is to discover that modern ideas are often the same ideas the Greeks had, only we think they are new."

"I think you ought to study Greek just because it is so enjoyable."

Never have I heard a boy disparage Greek. There have been a few, *very* few, who have not done well with it, but even they have been loath to give it up. The failures which have led boys to give up the subject appear to have been profitable, if only in terms of appreciating the challenge of a difficult subject. Certainly the boys who failed seem to have little regret at having tried.

In our attempts to persuade boys to study Greek, parents are often the greatest obstacle. We write to the parents of those boys we think should take Greek, asking each family to discuss the matter with their son when he is home for the spring holiday. Some of the negative generalizations made by parents are:

What use will Greek be to my son? He plans a scientific career.

Greek is very difficult. Won't it pull his grades down and threaten his chances of getting into a good university?

I never studied Greek and I can't see any reason for my son to study it.

I don't want my son to have to work so hard.

We have too many intellectuals already, and Greek sounds pretentious.

I'd rather he took modern languages, as they are more useful.

The pragmatic and utilitarian views of some parents cloak their capacity to see intellectual enjoyment as also important. There are some things we achieve in our youthful years which bolster and uphold us throughout our lives. The refinement of music, art, Greek, philosophy when seriously pursued and deeply appreciated is a refinement our vulgar and noisy days could well encourage. Furthermore, young people in these trying days suffer from our formless, chaotic and transient views. Never have we needed more the influence of loveliness and beauty, of firmly rooted ideas and deeply held but informed convictions and commitments. These values will not just naturally come to us; they must be studied, mastered, developed. Without disciplined intellectual endeavor man is not a very constructive creature.

When the American Revolution had achieved its end, Dr. Rush of Philadelphia wrote to John Adams, the scholar of the Revolution, that he felt the ancient languages of Latin and Greek ought to be replaced with subjects more related to the democratic program of the new country. Adams replied, "I'd as soon close the shutters of my windows in order to see the sky."

To those who insist upon subjects being useful, who think that low grades in Greek are a handicap, and who feel that the work involved is too great, there are in their own terms some things

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that can be said. College admissions officers are much more sophisticated than their critics give them credit for. They know quite well the value of Greek, Latin, music and art when these subjects are competently taught. Indeed, I have heard admissions officers from some of the greatest technological institutes say they would prefer a student with Latin and Greek and little or no chemistry and physics. Such institutions know they can do the job in science, but the refinement of thought that comes from Latin and Greek they cannot manage.

Over a period of six years the Greek students at St. Paul's have achieved grades in Greek equal to their averages and usually well over their averages. In all truth their Greek grades have usually raised their averages. To be sure, these students have language aptitudes of superior quality, but it is for this very kind of student we urge the study of Greek.

For these students, what then happens to the study of modern languages and other important studies? Some delay the beginning of French, Spanish, German or Russian in the interest of greater depth in Latin and Greek. Others sacrifice or postpone modern history or more specific study of chemistry and physics. Mathematics is almost never omitted, partially because it is essential to further higher education, but largely because mathematics is in reality a different kind of language and needs to be learned in the early years, even as do Greek and Latin. Some drop Latin beyond Caesar and thereby begin a modern language. A number of students come to the end of their secondary education with English, Greek, Latin and mathematics and two years of Russian, or with four years of French or German or Spanish as their principal achievements. Others drop Greek after two years in order to pursue in the eleventh and twelfth grades the study of history or the sciences or religion or philosophy.

The impressive thing to us is the happy enthusiasm of our Greek students, who feel that two to four years of Greek have greatly enriched their intellectual life, and who find the ancient Greek so impressively relevant to all other studies. Not all students should be encouraged to study Greek, but clearly too many modern students of good ability are being denied one of the choicest morsels of intellectual and emotional satisfaction in being denied this absorbingly interesting language.

In recent years, for a host of reasons, we have underestimated the willingness and indeed eagerness of our youth to undertake great and demanding tasks. Our experience with Greek denies that the young are always looking for the easy subject, the least difficult way.

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